

ISSUES RELATED TO THE PROVISION OF EMERGENCY SHELTER
IN DROUGHT CONDITIONS

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Introduction

In the immediate past, as well as in the present, there have been major drought relief operations in Africa. Although the area most affected has been those countries in the Sahel region, others such as Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Somalia have also experienced drought of such magnitude that massive relief programs were initiated.

A major facet of these operations has been the provision of food and water to the victims of the drought. Later, aid is often used to assist drought victims in replenishing animal herds, acquiring seed for crops, improving water sources, etc. Several agencies have also proposed emergency shelter and housing programs for the victims. This paper explores the issues related to the provision of emergency shelter under drought conditions and the impact of such programs in a long-term context.

I. Refugee Profile: Overview

The significance of drought in any area is not usually in the lack of drinking water but rather in the damage to crops. Crop failure is particularly critical to small subsistence farmers and pastoralists, but each is affected differently by such a disaster.

- A. **Subsistence Farmers:** Subsistence farmers typically depend entirely upon crops grown for food and, in good times, enough food will be harvested to last until the next harvest, with any surplus being sold for other supplies. The failure of the rains during the growing season is known as the period of drought, but the devastating impact on the people can vary by months. The difference revolves to a large extent around the resources of each family, such as the amount of food stored, the amount of money available to purchase grains from other areas, the extent of credit available, the terms of credit, etc. The effects of a drought will also depend on the length of the drought, as in some areas of northern Ethiopia where the drought in 1973 was preceded by several years of poor rains. Farmers on some marginal lands suffer temporary shortages before harvest nearly every year.

Irrespective of causes or variables, there came a time in the droughts of Africa in the 1970's when resources were exhausted for many, and food aid was needed for survival. If aid was not received within their community, then people traveled to where food existed. This was not a move en masse, but rather moves by individual

families. It is at the feeding center that shelter must be considered for the influx of families seeking food assistance.*

- B. Pastoralists (or semi-nomadic peoples): The areas most prone to drought are the semi-arid grasslands which even in good times receive comparatively little rain. Semi-nomadic peoples have for centuries utilized this marginal land for grazing of their herds. Widespread drought can be devastating, however, in an area of such a delicate ecological balance.

The typical migration of nomadic peoples has always been in response to the amount of foliage available for their herds. Migratory patterns are usually well-established with moves toward areas of increased rainfall. As their normal diet is milk, a drought affects the people by reducing the milk output of the cattle, goats and camels.

The response of pastoralists to drought is the movement of their herds to other areas where food exists. Although such movements are part of the normal migratory patterns, they are not without difficulty in light of territorial claims by other tribes, claims by farmers on the more fertile riverbank lands, etc.

Drought over large regions, however, can severely deplete livestock herds, as seen in most semi-arid lands affected by drought. The men often travel great distances to non-affected areas with the remaining animals. For this reason, most of the refugees who come to feeding centers from pastoralist tribes are women and children.

Construction of lightweight shelters is commonly a nomadic woman's responsibility. Although the materials for such a structure are typically re-usable and designed to be transported, refugees in drought conditions will commonly arrive at a feeding center with no building materials. The ability of the refugees to construct a shelter is almost directly dependent upon whether the materials commonly used in building are available at the new location. This may indeed be problematic if, for example, grass mats are used and there is no grass available or suitable for use.

II. Depletion of Housing Stocks

A drought in itself is not the type of disaster which depletes the housing stock. Concern for shelter stems not from the destruction of housing, as in an earthquake, but from the need for shelter of people who have left their homes and migrated in temporary search of food or water. Hence, an emergency shelter or housing program should not be undertaken unless the victims of the drought leave their residences and move to a new location.

* It should be noted that, as with crop farming communities, feeding centers are disruptive to people and should be set up only if it is impossible to distribute food in that community through the existing infrastructure.

III. Exposure Risk

In drought conditions -- and in the subsequent environmental conditions caused by the drought (e.g. windstorms, etc.) -- there is not a sustained long-term risk to individuals from the climate. Individuals may live for extended periods during the drought with only minimal need for shelter. In the short term, food, clothing and blankets are of a higher priority, especially during the actual migration.

Concern as to exposure risk is primarily related to disease precipitated by a weakened physical condition. For example, cool nights can more easily result in pneumonia, particularly in malarial areas. Shelter may thus be needed for protection from the sun in the day, from the cool nights, or from rain. The need for such protection can be met in a variety of ways (i.e. shade trees) and does not presuppose a formal structure. Often, traditional structures made of local materials are well suited to meet the needs.

The most important function of shelter, however, may not be protection from the elements, but rather the establishment of a point of reference for the displaced family. This point of reference may be defined as a gathering point for the family, a gathering point for the family's belongings and herds, and/or a location for the receipt of services.

Exposure risk varies greatly with geographic location, season, climate and altitude. It also varies with the experience and resources of the affected peoples. The semi-nomadic pastoralists, accustomed to living with the hot days and cool nights, may be less affected than more sedentary farm families.

IV. Shelter During Migration

Shelter requirements during an actual migration are minimal and can usually be met by the refugees themselves. Migrations caused by droughts are not of the type in which long columns of people move at the same time from point to point or form clearly defined refugee streams. When drought victims do migrate, it is in small groups which straggle from the drought zone towards the urban centers, or to areas where they feel they can find better conditions. Certain routes will, of course, be more highly traveled than others (e.g. main roads leading to large cities, passes or valleys through mountain regions, etc.); but even so, large streams of people will not normally form.

If at all possible, it is best to provide aid within the drought-stricken community itself rather than at centers outside the area. This will help to prevent the migration in the first place. Attempting to provide services en route, along migration routes or at the point where refugees are migrating, will only increase the number of people leaving the drought zone.

Agencies that have attempted to set up wayside feeding stations have found it difficult to distinguish those who actually need the services from the non-affected population who are normal users of the route. Furthermore, the way-stations rarely serve that function, and instead become a terminus. In this case, the agency will find itself ill-prepared for the large settlement that may develop overnight.

Some agencies that have attempted to provide food and shelter in a drought have set up central feeding centers within the drought zone. This, too, has caused people to leave their lands and set up camp near the feeding center. Most of the agencies that participated in the Sahel operations and in Ethiopia concluded that feeding centers should not be set up, but that aid and services should be provided in such a way that the drought victims could remain on their land or in their communities. (This can be accomplished by distributing aid through tribes, clans or villages.) This would have the effect of reducing or even eliminating the shelter requirements from the relief agencies' point of view, unless the traditional building materials are affected by the drought.

V. Shelter at the Terminus of Migration

As noted earlier, most refugees do not require extensive shelter support while en route. However, once they have stopped moving, either temporarily or permanently, the situation may change. The terminus of migration may be in a new climatic region where shelter from the environment is at least more nominally required; and a static situation usually dictates that non-exposure risk considerations are enhanced, especially the need for having an enclosed space to retain the refugee family's goods and belongings.

There are four distinct situations which have been encountered by relief administrators in droughts that required consideration of shelter or housing requirements. They are:

- A. Shelter at feeding centers: As pointed out earlier, if food or water can be distributed to the affected people through a distribution system which reaches the people in their own communities, there will be little migration. If, however, food is distributed by setting up "central" feeding centers that require the people to migrate in order to receive the aid, then temporary shelter may be needed.

Food distribution centers are usually located along a major road, and often located on the edge of an urban center. Although there may be some assimilation of the migrating peoples into existing housing, the demand will undoubtedly outstrip the supply.

The ownership and suitability of available land is an important consideration in any housing program. Feeding centers are often located on public land (e.g. schools, churches or parks) or on undeveloped municipal land holdings. Vacant land is sometimes chosen, but is almost always vacant because of the undesirability of the area. It is rarely served by utilities and other services.

The major shelter issue confronting relief agencies is what level of shelter support should be provided at the feeding center. Most agencies feel that emergency shelter (such as tents) or temporary structures are the best approach. However, even temporary shelter can have very complex consequences, particularly when "temporary" can mean months or years. Some of the issues which must be faced include:

1. Does a temporary housing standard which exceeds the normal living standard discourage people from returning to their communities?
2. Does the temporary housing provided take into consideration family, tribal and religious values of the people?
3. Does the temporary housing plan encourage self-direction or support dependency upon the feeding center?

The need for temporary shelter is, of course, dependent upon many variables such as the magnitude of the drought, the projected length of stay by the people who have migrated to the center, the climate, the resources of the selected people, the health of the people, etc. At some feeding centers, the relief agency assumes responsibility for the care of widows, the ill, the handicapped and the aged. This almost always has become a long-term involvement. Once a family group has relinquished responsibility for that member -- particularly in light of the hardships they themselves have faced -- it may be difficult to re-integrate those who receive special support, especially if they are left behind. Thus, permanent housing will be needed for these special wards. It should be pointed out that most communities assume responsibility for such unfortunate members and assist with their housing.

- B. Housing in major urban areas: Nearly all countries affected by the droughts of the 1970's experienced massive influxes of people into the urban areas. Often, the people who migrated to the cities did so with the intent to remain there, and may have had families or friends already there. In Addis Ababa, many of the migrants found shelter with family or friends; but even so, some people were without shelter. Unless these people were assisted in returning to their former communities, the housing needed would be of a more permanent type. In N'Djamena, Chad, in the drought of 1974, many people migrated to the edge of the capital to a river-bank area and lived in temporary shelters constructed of local materials. Again, these temporary shelters tend to become permanent structures.

The number and percentage of persons remaining depend on a wide variety of factors, including: the length of time they are refugees in the camp; their prospects for economic advancement if they stay or leave; the way in which they perceive the society in the towns; their age at the time they enter the camp and at the time they leave; and the availability of jobs in the host community. In relation to these considerations, the availability of permanent shelter or housing plays a relatively minor part in decision-making as to whether to go or to stay.

If the refugees do elect to remain, the government is then faced with the problem of having to extend housing opportunities to the newcomers. This, however, is not an emergency shelter consideration; rather, it is a permanent, long-term housing consideration.

In the majority of cases, the government policy has been to encourage the refugees to return to their homelands as quickly as possible rather than remain in the towns. It was felt that, if they remained, they would contribute to the urban problems that existed before the migration began.

Hence, the strategy normally chosen by relief agencies and governments alike has been to provide minimal shelter to newcomers rather than long-term or permanent housing. Often the approach includes the creation of refugee camps.

- C. Shelter in refugee camps: In order to more efficiently distribute relief supplies and also to ease the strain on local housing, refugee camps may be set up in or around cities. The administering agencies are then faced with the problem of deciding whether or not to install temporary shelter at these camps. Although most refugees do not require extensive shelter support while en route, the situation may change once they have entered a camp. The camp may be in a new climatic region where shelter from the environment is at least nominally required, and the situation in the camp usually dictates that non-exposure risk considerations assume a higher priority (for instance, the need for an enclosed space where the refugee family may retain their goods and belongings).

The major issue confronting the agency at this time is whether to provide shelters on a semi-permanent or permanent basis, or whether to provide minimal shelter in the form of tents or of materials similar to those used in the local shelters. In the majority of cases, the government policy has been to encourage the refugees to return to their homeland, or to attempt to resettle the refugees in new locations.

Therefore, at the terminus of migration, the strategy normally chosen by relief agencies and governments has been to provide minimal shelter when required, rather than long-term or permanent housing in the camp area. The materials used in construction of the shelters have depended upon what was locally available or could be easily brought from the capital (such as corrugated iron sheeting, duck cloth, etc.). Other materials used have included thatching grass, dirt, wood, and a very few tents.

It should be emphasized that, if the minimal housing approach is selected, the importance of adequate sites and services programs in the refugee camps is increased. Programs of sanitation and other environmental control measures become especially important.

- D. Housing in resettlement areas: In some countries, the government has encouraged the refugees from a drought to resettle permanently in other areas. These resettlements constitute a need for permanent housing.

VI. Political Problems Related to Shelter Provision

When a government or agency begins to undertake a housing or shelter program at the terminus of migration, several key political issues are immediately raised. The first relates to the problem of permanence. Many agencies fear that, if they establish decent temporary or long-term structures, they will be encouraging the refugees to remain on site. While this fact in itself has not been shown to be a major variable in why refugees elect to remain in a community, it is perceived as such by the government and by residents in the host community. If local government authorities undertake such a program, they can usually expect severe criticism or opposition from the non-refugee population.

A second, and related, political problem which often arises stems from the provision of housing for refugees while many residents in the host community are not adequately housed. Governments especially draw heavy criticism from the residents for putting the needs of the "outsiders" over the needs of the existing population. Shelter and housing programs usually draw more criticism in this area than do feeding programs or the provision of other relief items and services.

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